

# INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

WINTER 2009

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**FRANK GEHRY REINVENTS THE AGO**

WINTER 2009

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# CALIFORNIA DREAMSCAPE

THIS SAN DIEGO FAMILY BELIEVES IT'S WHAT'S OUTSIDE THAT MATTERS. HUSBAND-AND-WIFE ARCHITECTS RICARDO RABINES AND TAAL SAFDIE APPLY THEMSELVES TO THE TASK OF BRINGING IT IN.

BY KATHLEEN DORE PHOTOGRAPHY BY UNDINE PRÖHL

The house's surroundings are designed as a sequence of rooms that, as you move away from the house and down the hill, become more informal, says Ricardo Rabines. The architects created shade in the Mediterranean-like climate by designing a large overhang that shields the upper windows from the sun, but slants upward to maximize the view from inside. By the outdoor fireplace, a wood trellis creates a delicate pattern of shadows below that Rabines says creates the feeling of a soft curtain rather than a wood structure.



The clean graphic lines of the design are softened by the home's subtle earth-toned palette of woods, travertine and cream. A sense of the site's geography is mirrored in the home's multiple levels.







Staggered ceiling heights ensure each area maintains a comfortable ceiling height for the size of the room. From the living room, one can look down through the sitting room windows into the valley or up through the clerestory windows to the sky.



In Rancho Santa Fe, “new” is not so easy to do. Located on rolling hills only miles from the Pacific Ocean, this bedroom community a half-hour drive north of San Diego has prided itself, since its inception in the 1920s, on keeping things the same. This holds especially true when it comes to architecture. On the community association’s website, pop-ups compare photos of prominent buildings as they were when they were built over 80 years ago to how they look today. The only difference appears to be a sepia tone.

To build here, plans must be submitted to a community-controlled jury that enforces regulations designed to ensure a structure’s exterior architecture preserves the development’s “ambiance.” While making sure that no visual abhorrence springs up, the process has also led to a degree of sameness, especially a preponderance of terracotta-tile-roof, Spanish-style architecture.

How then to explain the refreshingly modern glass, wood, and stucco private residence designed by the San Diego-based firm Safdie Rabines Architects? Simple, says Ricardo Rabines, half of the husband-and-wife team of principals: they broke the rules.

“We were really lucky that there was one person on the board who appreciated modern architecture,” says Rabines. “He understood what we were doing.” What they were doing was designing a residence that gave the owner the large home (approximately 10,000 square feet) she desired, while also meeting their own stringent principles of retaining sensitivity, almost reverence, for the natural environment. It took eight years from the design stage through the regulatory process and then construction, but the uniqueness of the site was preserved.

“Being on the hill, the site had 360-degree possibilities,” says Taal Safdie, a Montreal native and the daughter of renowned architect Moshe Safdie. “You could see the sunrise and sunset, and it’s so rare to get a site like that.” Even rarer in this neighbourhood of exquisite natural beauty, is for new construction to be so carefully adapted to its site.

“Most builders would flatten the hill to facilitate construction and because it’s much cheaper,” says Rabines. Instead, he and Safdie collaborated on a design that holds close to the contours of the land. The result is a structure that sits comfortably and confidently within its natural environment rather than on top of it.

The result is also a lot of steps. “I’m from Peru, and Peruvians love going up and down. We’re used to it,” jokes Rabines. Kidding aside, the frequent changes in elevation, both within the home’s core and throughout its outdoor living areas, solved one of the architects’ main challenges.

“The owner wanted a very large house with very large rooms for entertaining, but we wanted to ensure that it would still feel intimate, so the challenge was to break up the scale,” says Safdie. The changes in elevation do this by separating multiple large public rooms onto different levels, so the interior doesn’t appear to be a single, excessively large volume. The rooms are visible from each other, but ceiling heights are staggered throughout to preserve scale within each room. The result is a sense of airiness without the emptiness that large open-concept areas can sometimes have.

The up-and-down floor plan also facilitates a continuous flow throughout the various sitting areas on the main levels, satisfying



Above: Many of the clerestory windows are operable so that they catch the ever-present breezes that cool the home’s interior naturally. A long reflecting pool leads away from the house to a hot pool, and then to the swimming pool. Below: An outdoor lounge area provides yet another spot to gather together and enjoy the view. The outdoor living spaces double the square footage of the home’s interior.







the client's desire for a space conducive to entertaining large groups, yet one that also features smaller nooks ideal for quieter interaction.

Materials were chosen to either subtly define or link spaces, as appropriate, and, crucially, to "take your eyes outside," as Safdie says. "What was really important in this design was the extension of each room toward the outdoors. We tried to make the outdoor spaces as unique as the indoor spaces and refer back to what was happening inside."

This extension takes place on the ground plane and ceiling plane, says Safdie. For instance, travertine floor tiles indoors carry right through glass pocket doors and onto outdoor living terraces for a seamless visual transition. Even the sweep of the ceiling's wood beams leads the eye through the clerestory windows skyward, providing ever-changing views, flooding the interior with light, and blurring the indoor-outdoor threshold.

"We like to say it's a very modern version of a Mediterranean-style home," says Rabines, where the emphasis is on the easy flow between indoors and out (which ideally responds to the region's temperate climate). Even the palette of the materials reinforces the theme. "It's a clean-lined modern house, but with warm, inviting, earthy materials," says Safdie. "The stucco walls come from the earth, grounding the house, and the wood on the high levels gives a floating feeling," explains Rabines. Like you're on top of the hill...or even better, on top of the world. •



A photograph of a modern dining room. In the foreground, a long wooden dining table is surrounded by white upholstered chairs with wooden legs. On the table, several metallic, spherical decorative objects are arranged. The background features a kitchen area with a curved counter and a large abstract painting on the wall. The ceiling has exposed wooden beams, and the floor is made of large, light-colored tiles.

Opposite page, from bottom: Curved lines soften the bedroom and give it a feeling of nesting, while a curved wall behind the bed separates the bedroom proper from the closet and dressing room; a refined elegance achieved through a limited palette of materials, like fir wood panels, brings a warm minimalism to the powder room; the island's curved, raised breakfast bar encourages family and friends to gather in an otherwise streamlined no-nonsense kitchen. To the right is a breakfast nook with floor-to-ceiling windows. This page: A few steps down from the kitchen, the dining room offers ample room for seating large groups, but maintains the home's informal vibe.